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Far from any Center: Articulating Race, Gender and Cultural Studies in the Neoliberal Academy

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Having entered this very tiny space we asked ourselves questions like: What shall we call ourselves? Shall it be an institute? On looking around, we clearly weren't institutionalized in any way, so that name wouldn't do... [W]e were clearly far from any center. Throughout the 1960s, in fact, we were moved from one temporary residence to another, in and out of a series of Quonset huts, provisional structures built during the war and intended to last about six months - until the German bombers came. ...In case we had any doubts about our marginal status in the field, this physical displacement and the space in which we operated symbolized it for us daily.

—Stuart Hall (1990)

Cultural studies is not merely interdisciplinary; it is often, as others have written, actively and aggressively anti-disciplinary

— Grossberg, Treichler and Nelson (1992)

Out of Rooms

Stuart Hall infuses his 1990 recollection of the emergence of the Birmingham School with a characteristic mixture of critique and affection. The Centre for the Study of Contemporary Culture, which he directed for over ten years, was a “locus to which we retreated when the conversation in the open world could no longer be continued.” And yet, he adds with warmth, his memories of the Centre “are mainly of rows, debates, arguments, of people walking out of rooms” (1990). It is perhaps not a surprise that Hall would practice the very modes of analysis he helped develop at Birmingham in his recollection of his time there. The Centre’s work existed “always in a critical relation to the very theoretical paradigms out of

which it grew and to the concrete studies and practices it was attempting to transform.”

Hall is, as ever, attuned to the symbolism and political economy of space and place in his recollections. Members of the Birmingham School rejected the moniker *institute* since “[o]n looking around, we clearly weren’t institutionalized in any way...” They chose instead to become a *Centre*, yet that term wasn’t quite right either, since “we were clearly far from any center.” Nonetheless, the Centre offered intellectual, social and institutional grounds for those who, due to racism, classism and colonialism, rarely inhabited university spaces that felt more like *their own*. It is difficult to “decenter or destabilize” (Hall 1990) traditional disciplines or take the “intellectual risk of saying to professional sociologists that what they say sociology is, is not what it is” from anywhere or nowhere. Particularly as a Jamaican-born British intellectual, Hall’s queries about how to house work that critically engages social institutions from within such an institution goes to the heart of cultural studies’ powerful, and powerfully vexed status as an *inter-* and *anti-*discipline, positioned between and against traditional fields of knowledge.

Hall’s recollections are a key piece of the social history of critical inquiry during the emergence of a new, neoliberal model of higher education. The Birmingham School and its correlates on both sides of the Atlantic developed cultural studies during neoliberalism’s “major and frontal assault on the free public-education system itself” (Hall 1990). The pressures of new management practices, corporatization and treatment of education as a consumer product opened distinct possibilities and challenges for the field. One of Hall’s most influential analytics, *articulation* (1980), has helped those working in cultural studies to elucidate the processes through which individuals and collectives come to understand, and shape, connections to other people as well as to places, objects, economics, symbols, social relations and more (Slack 1996). In this piece for the Iowa Stuart Hall Collective, and on the occasion of ever-shrinking budgets for public universities (as the great moving right show has continued its rightward movement), I treat cultural studies as an articulation to pose questions about what can be studied, spoken, written and taught in colleges and universities under neoliberalism – how, by whom and for whose benefit. Doing so maps the powerful dis/connections between academia and activism, institutionalization and destratification, pedagogy and politics that Hall examined so incisively throughout his career.

Thinking with Hall, I map the productive foundational tension of cultural studies between enjoyable engagement of popular culture and radical critique of capitalism’s uses for race, gender, class and culture as productions that position some bodies as somehow more proximate to labor and others to leisure, some to pleasure and others to pain or precarity. I suggest that articulation’s notion of

productive dis/unity sheds light on cultural studies' mixed relation to traditional and nontraditional knowledges, base and superstructure, cultural critique and appreciation.



Figure 1: Plaque on the Muirhead Tower commemorating The Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

In Hall's account, the Centre takes many spatial forms – it is a very tiny space, a retreat, a marginal status, a physical displacement, a temporary residence. His phrase *out of rooms*, then, reads as acts of departure and disengagement from scholars who would in many cases, circle back to the Centre. *Out of rooms* registers the Centre's early status outside the cosmopolis of London as well as Birmingham's own hierarchy. And the phrase names work that required a physical address, yet ultimately unfolded in radically decentralized, diverse and disparate ways. My sense, from Hall's remarks about the Centre that he himself eventually left for the Open University in 1979, is that he wouldn't have had it any other way.

Nanny States, Coffee Tables and the Nasty Down Below

On the one hand, this [assault] represents the attempt to computerize and business-manage the entire world; but, on the other, it has as its central focus the question of what is being taught in two areas: literature and history.

Stuart Hall (1990)

I'm trying to return the project of cultural studies
from the clean air of meaning and textuality and
theory to the something nasty down below.

Stuart Hall (1992)

In the mid-1970s, while the Centre was rounding off its first decade, Britain staged its "Great Debate on Education." Conservatives charged universities with preparing students to become skilled, "disciplined" members of the workforce (Miller and Ginsburg 1991: 49). They developed "EDUCASHUN ISNT WURKING" as their pointed slogan, and finally defeated Labor in 1979 after slashing education budgets, including milk provisions. Their new discipline weened citizens off the "nanny state," including schoolchildren off milk. At the same time, they cracked down on college students' dissent, which Conservatives blamed on Marxist critique "especially in the social science fields" (62). Aimed directly at scholars like those at the Centre, this assault on the free public education system played out through curriculum as well as tuition hikes, up through Education Secretary Baker's New National Curriculum in 1988.



Figure 2: Screenshot from *Stuart Hall: Race, Gender, and Class in the Media*. An online project by Al Jazeera. Narrated by Natalie Jeffers, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, UK. URL: https://youtu.be/FWP_N_FoW-I.

The Great Debate hinged ultimately, Hall (1990) argued, on "what is being taught in two areas: literature and history." As the phrase "nanny state" enacted neoliberalism by activating fears over the infantilization and feminization of the citizenry, the performative misspelling of the Conservatives' slogan ("EDUCASHUN") activated immigrant- and race-based panics over national identity and (cultural) capital in the former Empire. That is, the neoliberal education agenda marshalled Anglophilic pride and panic to limit access to

university and to police whose culture, which literacies and what students and faculty *belonged* in classrooms and course curricula. Black diasporic studies, Caribbean writers, histories of colonialism, street cultures – these were charged with not working (and of course we ask – for whom?)

Conservatives aimed to wall critical thinking off as the province of elites, systematically dissociating people of color and the working class from *culture* or *knowledge*. Nonetheless, in a special issue of *Discourse* on Hall in 2016, Gandin points out that cultural studies' critical pedagogies made inroads in the new neoliberal university in the 1980s through "a confluence of state policies and market-driven discourses" (292). Markets emerged for what became multicultural and diversity knowledges, as well as for the study of popular and "low" culture, as students in the U.S. especially were encouraged to "shop" for classes in a consumer-driven education marketplace.

Ruptures to cultural studies, however, also came from closer to home. Hall's story about feminism breaking in has been retold many times, emphasizing again the power of *curriculum*:

As the thief in the night, feminism] broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies. ...We were opening the door to feminist studies, being good, transformed men. And yet, when it broke in through the window, every single unsuspected resistance rose to the surface of fully installed patriarchal power, which believed it had disavowed itself. There are no leaders here, we used to say... You can decide whatever you want to decide, etc. And yet, when it came to the question of the reading list ... Now that's where I really discovered about the gendered nature of power. (Hall in Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler 1992)

In a recently published interview, bell hooks (2017) asks Hall about this redolent metaphor, explaining that her "students were really obsessed with your discussion of cultural studies and feminism" and were "particularly disturbed by your use of the imagery of shit." Hall's response maps the Centre on the faultline of public/private divisions of labor: "[I]t was very, very personal, tied up with our first child," he explains. "The Center burgeoned on and I came back [home] with stories of life at the front. That is when the explosion started... Talk about shit." Conference tables and coffee tables, knowledge production and social reproduction, "thieves" and "owners" – nanny states, milk and dirty diapers – these details describe the dis/unity and shifting articulations of cultural studies as it positioned bodies and distributed labor in relation to critical inquiry. In this telling, Hall frankly owns and critiques his masculine privilege: patriarchy emerged through a disavowal of its power and claim to have embraced feminism.

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